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Resources and Information for Teachers on Holocaust Denial, Revisionism, and Hate Speech

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Resources and Information for teachers on Holocaust Denial, Revisionism, and Hate Speech

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“Let nothing be said that could not be said in the presence of the burning children.”

—Irving Greenberg

Easy access to the Internet for students allows them to encounter a myriad of sites. Many teachers rightfully expect their students to use the Internet as part of the learning experience.

Teachers involved in Holocaust Studies, whether for Language Arts classes or for Social Science classes, may experience the dismaying matter of their students reporting back after finding Web sites that flatly contradict what has been happening in the classroom readings and discussions.

There are over 5,000 Web sites that promote hate speech, Holocaust Denial, and Holocaust Revisionism. Some of these sites do an excellent job of masquerading as respectable, properly credentialed academic sites. They often use some of the same photos that one might find say, in the Holocaust Chronicle website (<http://www.holocaustchronicle.org/>) or at the Drew University site (see Drew’s excellent links at <http://www.depts.drew.edu/chs/links.htm>). They will also employ what appears to be a rational mode of explanation and analysis. A very good example of this kind of rhetoric is found at Raeto West’s UK site, http://www2.prestel.co.uk/littleton/ww2_holocaust_revisionism.htm. Readers of this site find themselves bombarded with references and have to read with a diligent, discerning eye to catch the underlying attitudes.

Or students may be impressed by the process and the claims that led to what is called the Leuchter Report, a report purporting to offer the results of a chemical analysis of the shower walls at Auschwitz, finding no evidence of cyanide residues and thereby casting doubt about the genocide committed there. (See: Leuchter: <http://www.nizkor.org/faqs/leuchter/>). Students may also find it worrisome, at least, when deniers or revisionists claim that there is no evidence of a written order from Hitler.

What is one to do? Having ready access to websites that deal with these matters is helpful. But what of the matter of “debating” these claimants? Should valuable class time be spent in an item-by-item refutation of the claims of deniers and revisionists? Or simply deal with the phenomenon itself, and its underlying motivations?

A strong case could be made that a “debate” is precisely what the revisionists want. They lack academic standing and credibility (although one of the chief denial proponents, Arthur Butz, is a tenured professor at Northwestern, tenured in Electrical Engineering. See Northwestern’s president’s thoughts on Butz, the Holocaust, intellectual freedom, and free speech online at the following site:<http://www.northwestern.edu/newscenter/stories/2006/02/bienen.html>. The Internet has provided a ready means of transmitting their messages and young, naïve, trusting students may not have developed the critical intellectual skills needed to sort through the credentials of the many Holocaust related sites on the Web. Conducting a “debate” may be said to serve the purpose of spreading the revisionist claims, even though rebuttal may be powerful and convincing to most people. The nature of the “debate” is such that lending one’s academic standing and institutional prestige to the effort also succeeds in allowing the revisionists and deniers to bask in the limelight they seek.

French author Pierre Vidal-Naquet argues in his book, *Assassins of Memory*, that “debate” with revisionists and deniers is not something in which he will engage: “I have nothing to reply to them and will not do so. Such is the price to be paid for intellectual coherence” (xxv). His is an important observation, one that may be difficult to grasp at first. Northwestern’s president, Judi Remington, wrote online in 1997: “The attempts by Mr. Butz and other Holocaust ‘revisionists’ to deny history have no factual basis whatsoever and are a contemptible insult to all who experienced the horrors of that time and to their families. The Holocaust is not an issue for debate any more than the issue of whether the earth is round is a matter for debate.” Deborah Lipstadt, who in 2000 won a widely-acclaimed lawsuit brought by denier David Irving, notes that denial is a threat “to all history and to reasoned discourse” (156). As was widely reported for more than a year, Lipstadt faced an arduous libel trial in England fostered by David Irving. She won both the initial trial and the subsequent appeal, yet had this to say: “I do not delude myself that, though my battle with Mr. Irving may be over, the fight against those who will pervert the historical record for their own political and ideological goals has ended. That battle will continue for as long as history is written. Those of us writing history and those of us who care about truth and memory will have to be ever ready to stand against them.”

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/irving/article/0,2763,525335,00.html>).

Perhaps it would be fruitful for the teacher to explain how knowledge is constructed, and has been constructed, for many centuries. That is, knowledge in the form of truth claims is provisional; academicians accept as provisionally “true” those theories and claims of fact that have passed the various tests of academic rigor, logic, and rules of evidence. Until disconfirming information has also passed through this gauntlet, it will not be permitted into the arena of ideas upon which education, for instance, is based. In no case does the academic world allow a conclusion to precede evidence, a tactic that is widely practiced by deniers, even though they attempt to hide the fact.

It would also be wise for the teacher to be aware of and able to discuss with students the fact that Holocaust scholars differ widely in their acceptance and interpretations of the known facts of the Holocaust. Such differences may be, for example, over Hitler’s psychology or biography, or the role of the churches or Pope, or over function and intent with regard to Nazi designs for genocide.

Such disagreements are not unusual. This is all part of the normal process whereby professional historians and other Holocaust scholars meet in the marketplace of ideas to test their hypotheses. There is ample room for divergent opinions; indeed, some matters may never be fully known, so scholars have to be satisfied with the provisional answers reached... until new information sheds further light. Perhaps this is confusing to students, if not teachers. Such disagreements are a matter of degree, not kind. There is a place for “revision” in scholarship; indeed, it happens all the time, but it must follow the practices that have been established.

The late Phillip Hallie, a philosophy professor and Holocaust scholar, when faced with a question as to the claims of revisionists and deniers, stated his belief that revisionism and denial start with an initial position: the claimant hates Jews. Given this primary stance and motivation, it is no wonder that subsequent claims deriving from this stance will deviate significantly from the usual track that accepted claims follow.

It may be asked, “What is at stake here?” In response, it is important to keep in mind Vidal-Naquet’s virtual dismissal of revisionists and deniers: intellectual coherence is at stake. How does one go about organizing and interpreting information? What counts as evidence? Can hatred have a place at the rostrum? What are the side effects of hatred in an intellectual pursuit? Does dehumanization lend itself to the intellectual task of coming to grips with Nazi genocide?

In the “concentratory universe” of the Nazi Holocaust, the teacher is a guide, accompanying students, as Virgil guided Dante in the rings of hell, “inside the vicious heart.” It is not and never will be an easy task. Among other qualities, it requires wisdom, a solid grasp of the essential historical facts, and an incredible amount of strength on the part of the teacher/guide. There is a moral imperative in the Holocaust classroom, perhaps akin to Greenberg’s dictum about the burning children, that makes this journey for teacher and student one of the most significant they can ever undertake together. There are pitfalls everywhere on the journey, and we have attempted here to help with those. There is no need, however, as Dante saw it, to abandon

hope. There is perhaps no more hopeful endeavor in the human experience than that which binds the teacher and the student. Even in the realm of the death camps, we know that the silenced voices whisper from the ashes, and they urge in compelling terms the teacher to go on with the task.

For further information on the Websites that peddle denial and revisionist thinking, see the ADL site at: <http://www.adl.org/holocaust/introduction.html>.

For Arthur Butz, see: <http://www.nizkor.org/ftp.cgi/people/b/butz.arthur>

For Deborah Lipstadt, see: <http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/i/irving-david/press/irving-v-lipstadt.html>; <http://www.fpp.co.uk/Legal/Penguin/>;

For David Irving, see: <http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/i/irving-david/jackel/>;

For Tom Metzger, see: http://www.adl.org/learn/Ext_US/Metzger.asp;
<http://www.nizkor.org/ftp.cgi/people/m/metzger.tom/>
http://www.adl.org/issue_combating_hate/10faq_extremist_online.html
<http://hatewatch.org/>
<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/tech/BitByBit/gina0203.html>

For the New York Times story on Midwest hate groups and the 9/11 attacks, see: <http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/news/news-attacks-supremacists.html?ex=1006445364&ei=1&en=d60a9b310c013a7f>

For the Nizkor project, see: <http://www.nizkor.org/>

Lipstadt, Deborah. Denying the Holocaust. New York: Penguin, 1994.

Stern, Kenneth. Holocaust Denial. New York: The American Jewish Committee, 1993.

Vidal-Naquet, Pierre. Assassins of Memory. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

Oregon Holocaust Resource Center's recent news archive: <http://ohrc.pacificu.edu/index.cfm>

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